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The Mountain in the Sea: Place, Wilderness and History on the Sunset Side of Hoerikwaggo

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For six years of my life, I lived in Camps Bay.

That's a bit like saying I lived in Beverley Hills, or Knightsbridge, or on The Peak in Hong Kong. Every city has a suburb that is the local byword for conspicuous consumption, for interstellar property values, for self-indulgent wealth. In Cape Town to say you live in Camps Bay is to say your other car is a Range Rover; that your Pilates instructor comes to your house every morning; that your daughter started using Botox at seventeen.

None of those things were true of us. We lived in Camps Bay because my stepdaughters schooled there, in a perfectly ordinary government school, in a dilapidated house with west-facing views and no insulation in the ceiling. In the winter, every room was freezing cold; in summer the whole house baked in the heat coming through the roof. The landlord, who lived in Dubai, could not be bothered to do any maintenance, but the rent was affordable.

Still I felt ill at ease. Camps Bay! In my Twitter bio I used to say: I live on Hoerikwaggo's sunset side. Hoerikwaggo – the Mountain in the Sea – is what the Khoi-San people who lived here before the whites came called the high massif now known as Table Mountain. It felt like a pretentious thing to do but it was technically true: below us was the ocean; above us the house was overtopped by the sheer cliffs below the cable car; every evening the setting sun lit our house like a lantern, golden light blasting in from the west.

So, Hoerikwaggo: I blithely invoked a name from a language I do not speak, referring to a sacred wilderness in the middle of my city – a wilderness I hardly suspected, and the significance of which I failed to grasp.

This essay is about that wilderness, about this place I live in, and about how to be in it.

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You could think about it like this: there are three Camps Bays.

One is Camps Bay as it exists in the imagination of the property developers: the fantasyland depicted in the offices of estate agents like Engel & Völkers and RE/MAX: white-walled mansions and hotels, a line of palm trees fringing the beachfront, white sand, the limpid blue sea. A luminous dreamland. Wide, gently curving driveways climb from the beach, winding among sprawling houses, each more imposing than the next. The architectural vernacular here is solidly modernist: towering facades of glass and steel with infinity pools and wide view windows. The aim is to build out every square centimetre of your erf and then to rise up vertically as high as possible to ensure your unimpeded view of the ocean. It is not unusual for a large property to boast its own elevator. A common sign of renovations or building works in these parts is the presence of a crane, its cables rattling in the wind.

It was not always thus: Camps Bay used to be decidedly unfashionable. One factor was the Southeaster, which howls day and night all summer long. You might find this surprising, this being in the mountain's leeward side; but that's wind dynamics for you. Far from sheltering us from the trade wind, the mountain intensifies it: air coming in from False Bay climbs adiabatically over the mountain, cooling down and increasing in speed and then slamming down the western side, forming an even stronger downslope wind; a process the fluid dynamics of which were first described by the Swiss scientist Daniel Bernoulli, himself presumably no stranger to the realities of living on slopes. Harsh, dry and windswept: from October to March every year, that's Camps Bay for you.

Thus not a particularly desirable place for the rich to live. The built structures of the fifties were modest, built of brick or the surrounding sandstone, hunkered low against the slopes. The house we lived in was one of the last of these: a simple low-slung building intended as a beach house or a summer cottage; nothing too fancy.

But from the 1960s and 1970s onwards, as the wealth of middle-class white South Africa increased, the property boom began, and this boom continued in the years after Apartheid's end. Wealthy foreigners – or maybe just anyone unfamiliar with the biophysical realities of the place – were willing to put down tens of millions of Rands for mountainside properties with magnificent views. And once you've bought there, of course you *want* the view. You want the elevation and the glass, steel and concrete. And while you are but minutes from the sea, you want that swimming pool as well. Back in the days of our water crisis, when we lived in the shadow of 'day zero' – the prospect of Cape Town ('a world city!') running out of water – the City would regularly publish maps indicating the places where people were consuming more than their daily share. The poor backyards of the Cape Flats, where infrastructure was shoddy and pipes leaked, was one such hotspot. Camps Bay and Clifton was the other. From high up on the pipe track, you could see it: the swimming pools of the super-rich, sparkling blue, filled to the brim with municipal drinking water.

The second Camps Bay is the first one's shadow; its hidden underside. While the home-owners are wealthy, municipal budgets in Cape Town are stretched. Even in the white suburbs there is a lack of care. Building rubble and plastic waste mount up in the vacant plots. Homeless people sleep in the bushes, and the stands of long grass in the park below Fulham Road reek of human faeces. Above Theresa Road, the properties abutting the mountain feature electric fences and motion-activated searchlights that point upslope to guard against the unlikely possibility of incursions from above. Our neighbourhood watch WhatsApp buzzed with paranoid messages and thinly veiled racism: warnings about 'BM's' walking down the road; sightings of suspicious vehicles that turned out to be Ubers. There are none so fearful as the wealthy.

Neither does Camps Bay quite live up to its image as fashionable seaside playground. Above all, there is that wind: from October to January there are days when the Southeaster blasts down so hard that it whips the sea into a solid mass of frothy white and flying spray from the shore to a kilometre out. It howls all day and night through the gaps between the buildings. On rubbish collection days it sends municipal wheelie bins careening hundreds of meters down the street. And that architectural vernacular is poorly suited to local conditions. Near us there was an apartment where you could not open the front door on some days because the wind would blow the heavy steel and glass sliding balcony door on the other side of the flat right out of its frame. In late summer the afternoon sun reflecting off the hammered-silver brightness of the ocean turns each west-facing apartment into a miniature oven. At a sundowner event I attended some years ago, the guests ended up sheltering from the picture window by hiding on the east side of the house. Looking down to the garden below, I could see that the pool was surrounded by threadbare astroturf, littered with turds deposited by the owner's Labrador retrievers.

It is a suburb without a heart, without local life. In winter, street after street is empty, the homes of foreign residents standing empty. The restaurants exist for the overseas market: overpriced and bland. Other than beachwear outlets and estate agents there is not much in the way of local shops. Even in the summer the streets are unpeopled: the whites travel by car, including kids on their way to school, the streets being too steep for bicycles to be an option. The only humans on foot are black people: women coming in to work as domestic servants, men on their way to the building sites.

Thirdly, there is the landscape on and under which these properties are built. By this I do not mean 'Table Mountain', that familiar cliché of the Cape Town skyline, though the two are easily confused. I mean something very different: the granite shoreline, the gravelly slopes, the broken cliffs of stone rising behind the suburb. It is unimaginably ancient land. You will find no fossils here: the basement of dark shale poking out into the sea in Bantry Bay is made of silts that sifted down onto an ocean floor between 500 million and a billion years ago, before there was multicellular life on earth. The quartzitic sandstone that comprises the mountain proper is a bit younger: about 400 million years or so, dating back to the time of the emergence of the oldest forms of terrestrial life: fungi, primitive land plants, the earliest arthropods. Tectonic forces uplifted the mountain itself 250 million years ago, meaning that it is four times as old as the Alps or the Himalayas.

And that's it. Other than some remnants on the highest parts of the mountain, none of the more recent sedimentary formations that are typical of other parts of the world can be found here. They have all been scoured away. We live on a sparse layer of young alluvial soils thinly covering the eroded remains of an older landscape. Even the mountains we have now – the Table Mountain range, the Piketberg, the Cederberg – are the weathered stubs of the anticlinal *valleys* of the original range. The peaks are long gone.

Two things are worth noting. The first is that these time scales really are unimaginable. Numbers are an illusory technology: by representing and thus making manipulable the abstraction of time, they create a false sense of bringing into the reach of our understanding aspects of reality that lie well outside our actual comprehension. Our sense of duration starts to fail when applied to spans of time longer than a couple of thousand years. Geologists coined the term 'deep time' to stress this disjuncture between the scale of human and geologic events. In the history of this landscape, the city below – in fact, the entire history of human habitation on its slopes – is but a breath. White settlement, an eye blink. If left to themselves, all those glass and steel structures will wear away to nothing. This will take in the region of ten to twenty thousand years. The mountain itself will have hardly changed.

Secondly: none of this matters to the city below. In spite of the fact of the land's age and permanence – perhaps *because* of it – life in the suburb continues in perfect ignorance of what looms above. People are aware, of course, that the mountain exists. There it is, in plain sight, slopes dropping steeply down to the sea, an image that graces a thousand tourist websites. But it exists as scenery. Not more. Not as something to be experienced in its own right. This is the strange thing. You can live right in the middle of a sacred wilderness and never see it.

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This essay is about the mountain that I learned to see. But what I am really writing about is not the mountain, but me, how I saw it, and what that changed.

It's not an easy thing to capture. In his book *The High Sierra* Kim Stanley Robinson recounts a single, clear moment of conversion. It was in the seventies, in California, and he and his friends dropped acid on their first hike through the Sierra Nevada. For KSR the LSD, until then simply a juvenile thrill, transformed his experience, filled him with a vast sense of knowing, a sense of the landscape as something *more than real*, a granite world suffused with meaning, vast and sublime, holding him in its cupped hands.[1]

This could just be brain chemistry. But it wasn't only that. The acid was a passing phase, but for KSR the Sierras remained. They remained, and he changed: from a confused young man, pinballing across the USA with no clear sense of purpose, lost in America's clutter, to what he is now: an established and celebrated writer, the poet of a certain way of loving the planet and knowing it; of knowing it *by* loving it, loving it *by* knowing it. And for him, the High Sierras remained always the centre, the landscape that taught him his place in the universe.

It's more complicated here. For one thing, I cannot recall such a single, clear moment of realisation. The mountains of the Western Cape have always been part of my life and of my family's. At university my parents explored the mountains with the *Berg en Toer Klub* (BTK), a hiking organisation started in the heyday of Afrikaner Nationalism 'to promote a love of nature and the land by way of mountain and countryside hikes'.[2] I am not sure how much

love of nature those walks engendered, or of what kind; but they were certainly social events of considerable importance, helping to weave the networks that shaped Afrikaans culture and its sense of identity, its illusion of belonging; its sense that the mountains belonged to it and it to the mountains. *Oor ons ewige gebergtes waar die kranse antwoord gee*.[3]

BTK or not, this sense of appreciation of the natural world is something that my parents worked hard to bequeath to me and my sisters. Frequent walks in the mountain above Stellenbosch were a feature of my boyhood. This happened not without resistance on my part – the slopes were hot, and the fynbos tough and scratchy; I wanted to stay at home and read, to lose myself in the alternative otherworld of science fiction and fantasy. But in time I learned the pleasures of walking on those high paths; and by early adulthood I already had a sense that this terrain was not only familiar, but part of whom I felt myself to be. This dry land with its windswept clouds, the poor and sandy soil, these finely branched and thorny plants: this was where I lived.

I cannot say I felt I *belonged*, or that I felt at *home*. I was born from South African parents in the Netherlands, and lived there till I was four. Even this simple knowledge always served to give me a sense of displacement, a feeling of being at one remove from this country. I still recall the sense of shock at the oppressive heat when our family came back to South Africa; it always felt too much for me, too harsh. And then, as the repressive 1970s got under way, there was my family's growing sense of strain and alienation from the mainstream of Afrikaans social life; the callous culture of a white boy's school in Apartheid times; the sense of darkness gathering at the edges as writers were detained, activists murdered.

Above all, there was conscription. *Ons kinders is staatseiendom* (our children are state property), I overheard my mother remarking darkly to a friend, a statement that struck fear into my soul. I did not want to be a conscript – not only because I did not want to defend Apartheid, but even more because I did not want to die for it. I did not want to be here (hence all that science fiction.) For most of my teenage life I was consumed with thoughts about how to get away, how to escape from South Africa. In time Apartheid passed away, or transformed into something else less deliberately brutal but as unconsciously heartless. Conscription was ended, and it became possible to consider the possibility of living here. But that sense of disjuncture remains.

But it is not all. I found a pathway to something different. A dog showed me the way.

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Millie is what these days is known as an Africanis. This is a new-fangled notion. Until recently her kind were simply known as village dogs or by worse, frankly racist epithets. They were the dogs that black people had, and were not recognised as a proper breed by white South Africans at all. They were looked down upon as the products of miscegenation: crossbreeds, 'pavement specials'. But this has changed. Today, there is an Africanis Society of South Africa which exists to preserve them, arguing that they are a dog 'landrace'; a genetically diverse but still distinct locally adapted sub-species, brought to southern Africa by the people who populated this region before the whites arrived.

The whole Africanis thing is arguably a bit suspect. Lumping together into a single group all the different lineages of dogs that have lived in these parts before the settlers came is a typically white-colonial thing to do. But the fact remains that dogs have been around southern Africa at the very least since the second half of the first millennium. In a thousand-year-old grave site in a shell midden in Cape St Francis there are the remains of a young man who was buried with the skeleton of a juvenile dog nestled in his lap. Judging by those bones, this dog was similar to those that the colonists found in the company of the Khoi herders they encountered on their arrival here: small dogs, of gracile build, with long muzzles, pointed ears, up-curled tails; tawny in colour.

I like to think of Millie as one of these. She is wiry, surefooted, tough and resilient, not prone to any of the congenital diseases that trouble European breeds. While affectionate and gentle she has something in her that is quite separate. She's a dog's dog, shy and reserved, passionate, single minded, clear about her own wants and desires, moody. Submissive as a puppy, she has in adulthood become sternly opinionated, ready to give a piece of her mind to any other dog she considers ill-mannered or uppity. And she loves the mountains.

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There are a thousand ways up into the mountain. I found this way: You go alone.

Well, you do not go entirely alone, because you go with a dog. You go with the dog because she needs her walks, and the promise with which the girls secured the right to have puppies – that they would pick up the poo, that they would walk them every day – went the way that puppyhood does. The other dog is lame, but Millie *needs* her walk, and makes this fact known with heavy sighs and moody stares. For a while you are perplexed: how can you fit in your morning exercise (you like to swim) and have time to walk the dog? It takes a while to see the obvious, and to find the jeep track that snakes down from the contour path to Theresa Road. This is one great advantage of living in Camps Bay. You are on the doorstep of the high country.

But the important thing is that you go alone. Do not take a human companion, do not converse. Go in silence.

Do not even let your thoughts accompany you.

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Of course one is always thinking. But if you can learn to relinquish the thoughts as they come, something else can happen. You can, as Annie Dillard says, learn to see what there is to see.[4]

It is best to go early in the morning. It will still be cool; on windless mornings, a layer of chill air blankets the suburb well into the day. The slopes will be shadowed, waiting for the sun. The streets will be quiet. You can walk right up the middle of the road; the only traffic the occasional MyCiti bus bringing domestic workers to the stop in Susan Avenue.

But pay attention, even here. Below the broad, curved driveways the slope is already rising. In the hush before the traffic starts, you can hear the sea. The roadside verges are unkempt, with long grass, decaying tree stumps. People stir inside the houses. Smell of coffee on the morning wind. There's always a building site, bricks and breeze blocks neatly stacked beside the road, waiting for the workers. Here, Millie scouts for discarded chicken bones.

And then the jeep track, snaking steeply upwards.

In the High Sierra, KSR tells us, there are no paths. The land is open enough that you can make your own way. Not so here, in the densely vegetated Table Mountain National Park: here you keep to the paths, partly to preserve the plant life, partly because those bushes are thorny and the land full of snakes, and partly because it is easy – and dangerous – to get lost here. People die on this mountain. They walk up in flip-flops, without headgear, without something warm in case the weather turns, without water. (You are not my mom! one hiker challenged me when I admonished him about his lack of preparation). It is easy to get in trouble. So you stay on the path, and you pay attention. And if you come here enough, you will see.

You will not quite get to know every stone – though I will say that there are plenty of particular stones up the Kasteelpoort way that I personally know quite well. But after a while you will know the land well enough that you should be able to tell where you are merely by looking down at what is underfoot, by noticing what plants grow here, by listening to the creatures around you. Down on the lower slopes, gravel and rough sand, proteas, the odd cortaderia that has escaped from suburbia, the chirrup and fizz of the sugarbirds. Further up, the rough, rust-coloured shales and siltstones of the Graafwater complex; restios and proteas, the thin calls of starlings and sunbirds. And then the sandstone, initially encountered in the form of broken-down blocks and boulders, but eventually as the skeleton of the mountain itself, revealed beneath the thin blanket of soil. Here the plants are smaller, sparser; you start counting lichens among the living things you see, and you will hear the high, sharp screams of falcons, kites and eagles.

The sandstone is the thing. Granite is solid but it contains minerals that are soluble in water, so that with time rain weathers it away. The sandstone out of which the Table Mountain complex is made is almost pure silicon dioxide; chemically inert, compressed over aeons into impenetrable hardness. Well, not quite impenetrable: some minerals dissolve and leach out; but when the water evaporates it leaves a crust of silicate behind. In the early

morning sun you can see it, the rocks underfoot glittering like diamond. That's the thin layer of evaporated crystal, making the rock even more resistant to erosion.

We think of the mountain as grey, but the grey that you see is not the grey of sandstone. It is the lichen that grows on its surface, more quickly in the shade than in the sun. On the Kasteelpoort path, below the dividing line of the Graafwater complex, the slope is littered with boulders that have rolled down from above. Most of them are softly rounded, mottled black and grey. One of them is not. It sits right on the path, about 500 metres above the pipe track, a vast chunk of solid rock three metres on a side. Around it, there's none of the broken bush that is one sign of a recent landslide. The shrubs around it are undamaged. So it's been there for a while. But its edges are unweathered: razor sharp and fine; its sides untouched by lichen: creamy white, deep gold, dark rusty red. Further downslope, you will see some companion boulders, lying there as if newly minted. Clearly part of the same landslide, maybe even broken off the larger piece. How long has it been there? It is a mystery, sitting there, right on the path, huge and silent, its shadowed flanks cool even in hot weather. Beautiful.

You can tell that I love the sandstone. I feel about the sandstone as Gimli the Dwarf felt about the land around Helm's Deep in J. R. R. Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings*, of which he said that it has tough bones. The story of the mountain in the sea is the story of erosion. Granite and sandstone form its hard infrastructure, the durable core that has longest resisted weathering. Look at a map of the Western Cape and you will see a 400 kilometre-long straight line interrupting the gentle curvature of the African coast, a rampart stretching diagonally from Cape St Helena in the northwest to Agulhas in the southeast. More than five hundred million years ago, along the line of a subduction zone between continental plates, magma forced its way up between the layers of shale, cooling down to form a long granite intrusion, a dyke that protected the land behind it from the sea's onslaught. The vast rectangular platform of land that you see on the map behind it – *that's* the actual Cape Peninsula, not the little curved finger that we call by that name today. Behind that rampart of granite, on that floor of shale, over hundreds of millions of years, sand blew to form a pile that in some places must have been seven kilometres deep. That pile of sand, compressed over a period many thousands of times as long as humans have been on the planet, fused and melted into hard, crystalline stone that was then lifted, buckled and folded by tectonic pressures to create a mountain range thought to have been as high as the Rockies are today. Those same forces then tore it apart as Gondwanaland broke up. One remnant is today in Argentina: the Sierra Ventana. Another is Mount Wellington in Southwestern Tasmania, 800km south of Melbourne. Another, the Pensacola mountains in Antarctica.

And part of it is here.

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At any point here in the heights, you can bring your face up to the cliffside. There you might see the merest sliver of green, slighter than a nail paring, anchored in a crack so small it is almost invisible. Somehow a seed has lodged there; somehow against all odds it has germinated; by chance the winter rains have sustained it for a few weeks. Odds are that it will die. But it will have made an outpost, left some organic matter to sustain the next plant that comes, and the next. In time someone's questing roots will find their way deeper down the crack, lengthening and broadening it, splitting the stone, working with the sun and rain to break apart even this inert substrate. Life has been part of the making and unmaking of this mountain from the beginning.

So as you follow the paths you will also learn to know, and to be known by, all the other people who live here. First of course, is the fynbos; the mix of restios, ericaciae and proteas that spread across this land over the last ten or twenty million years. The community of living beings here is rugged and fragile; sparse and persistent; hanging on to life on soil poor in nutrients, subject to endless winds, infrequent rains. Here it is often cold well into the dry season (every year Capetonians complain about the cold Decembers, forgetting they complained about the exact same thing the year before). Megafauna are few; unless perhaps we count lizards and mongooses as megafauna. This is a place in which the death of a mouse is a significant event. In the soft sand along the path you might come across the skull of one,

surrounded by a seething mass of ants; a feast for thousands. In winter the hills are abuzz with the twitter of many quite invisible birds, none of them venturing more than a few centimetres above the canopy of fynbos, as if they are a species of avian mice, flitting about in a world that may be as little as two metres in vertical height. After rain, the mountain resounds with the fluting sounds of uncountable frogs, who somehow subsist during the summer encased behind a covering of dried mud.

All these lives, going their own way. On the slope above Slangolie Ravine, we once watched a peregrine falcon. In the still winter air it circled slow and graceful, rising on an updraft until it was level with the tops of the cliff far above. Then it folded its wings and plummeted straight down, falling faster and faster, like an arrow loosed at the ground. At the last moment it opened its wings and pulled out of its dive, only to start its spiralling climb again and repeat the whole performance. Again and again it dived. Was it simply enjoying the sensation of flight and its own skill? Perhaps. But I have also been told they do this to flush out small creatures from their hiding places. More than once I have experienced it myself. We would be walking quietly along the lower landscape, suspecting nothing, and then suddenly there would be the *whump* and woosh of feathers slamming past right above our heads.

And once I was on degraded land lower down, private property overrun with Port Jackson and black wattle. Here there is none of the variety and complexity of the fynbos, just the monoculture of invasive aliens. Not my preferred place, but this was during the pandemic, when government in its wisdom closed the Table Mountain Reserve, as if the coronavirus lurked there waiting in the clouds. The trees enclose you, so that there is no view; but after it rains the air is filled with a rich, resinous scent. I had brought our dogs, but they had gone clattering off into the thicket on a chase of their own. For a moment I was alone.

And then I wasn't alone. Two metres before me, right in the path, stood a caracal. Slender, poised, long in the leg, with narrow shoulders and dark tufted ears, it looked straight at me, rooted to the spot. *Rooikat*! I fumbled for my phone to take a picture. It bared its teeth and hissed at me, a fierce soft spitting sound. Then, utterly silent, like smoke on the wind, it was gone. The hair on the back of my neck was standing up. I felt as if I had been stumbling through the forest and suddenly found myself face to face with a prince in his living room. Graceful, quiet, fierce, self-possessed. This was his land.

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Millie does not think this is her land. Dogs are territorial, but hers is a few square metres of urban turf down below. She does not belong here.

But she seems at home. Perhaps it is the way she comes alive, in a way she never does elsewhere. All her senses are fully engaged as she explores, sampling the scents of stone and rock and grass. Whenever she gets to a sufficiently large boulder she will leap effortlessly to top it and pose there for a moment, silhouetted against the sky, her nose high in the wind. At home she is affectionate, even needy. Up here, she eschews human contact. If I reach out to pat her she moves sharply away, as if that kind of behaviour is not appropriate between man and dog, not here. While we walk, she follows her own routes, and when she looks at me, it is not with the soft puppy-eyes that her species have evolved to engage the sympathies of humans. Rather, she stands some distance off, looking right at me, her ears cocked: fully alert, separate and focused; full of interest, as if wondering what strange thing I am going to do next. Or perhaps hoping for a snack.

What strikes me is how in tune she seems with this landscape. Part of it is the way her tawny coat blends in with the stone and the bush, part of it is her sure-footedness as she flows up and down slopes too steep for me. She seems to understand how to survive. On a hot day, when water is scarce and heat exhaustion threatens, she will find a sliver of cool ground in the shadow of a boulder and lay down there, pressing her body against the stone. And she knows where to find water. One winter day we topped out above Woody Ravine after a rainstorm, hot and thirsty despite the recent rain. She refused the offer of water from my bottle, but drank instead from the mountain: passing a boulder, she leapt to the top and lapped the water puddled there. Further upslope, she found a cracked stone like a hollow gourd with litres of rainwater inside. She licked dewdrops pearling on the tips of restios. She stood under an

overhang and drank from the water dripping down like a curtain, catching it on the tip of her tongue. She was utterly herself in a way I never see at home. A mountain spirit, utterly self-assured; open to the land, its messages, its ways.

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So, this is one way in. Be like Millie.

You will have thoughts – I am sure she does too – but do not entertain them. Do not attend either to the view or the conversation in your head. Taste the air. Feel the strength in your body. Watch your footing.

As you go up above the soft broken stone of the Graafwater, the soil becomes thinner, the plant life less dense. Look down: you are walking on the bones of the earth, the living rock, solidity itself. The path snakes stepwise up and the ground becomes steeper – much steeper – till you reach that point where the slope of the land begins to trouble your body's felt distinction between that which is floor, and that which is wall. It is a subtly unsettling feeling, even when there isn't a yawning abyss wide open right next to you. The ground you are on is no longer simply holding you. You are responsible for every step. On your left, the mountain's flank towers over you – sometimes merely steep, often ponderously overhanging; layer upon layer of stone stepping up to the sky's rim in stairs of grey and black, persisting through unfathomable years, as unchanging as anything can be in this shifting world, but also here *right now* in this moment, pulsing with heat on the summer days, glistening wet after rain. On your right, the steep plunge down, the empty air. A crow might fly past, swerving expertly around the outcrops twenty metres below. Though you can hear the trucks snarling away far below on Victoria Drive, you are in another world.

Over time this is what grew in me – a dawning awareness of the power and the spirit of these steep and narrow uplands, this lonely place. Once I had seen it, it would not leave me. I'd always taken for granted the steep grey walls above Kloof Nek Road. Now, caught in a traffic jam approaching Camps Bay Drive, I would find my attention being sucked away by the awareness of the vertiginous spaces above. I would look up at the cliff walls and feel dizzy, frightened even.

One winter, near Woody Ravine, just as a major storm was sweeping in, I encountered two young men, encumbered with metres of nylon rope, carabiners, harnesses and helmets. Off, I asked them, to do some serious climbing? Climbing, yes, they said. Serious? They shrugged. I enjoyed their cocky self-assurance and wished them well. But even they are trespassers here. With luck and skill they might traverse this steep country, pause here for an hour or two. But the people of this landscape are the kites and the falcons. The black eagle. Baboons, tahrs, yes! But not us. It is not domestic space. It is itself. A vertical landscape, arid and beautiful.

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Once you have seen it, you cannot unsee it. Or, to put it more accurately, it is possible to learn a new way of seeing. Because the high upland is not, in fact, a separate world, but the heart of it. It is not distinct but extends downward into the city below: not its scenic backdrop but the stony ground on which it lives. The shale-floored bowl that cups the city centre with its puny crop of skyscrapers. The wealthy 'southern suburbs' on the eastern slopes, protected from the wind and receiving by far the most of the winter rain. The vast flatlands beyond, originally wetlands and strandveld, home to antelope and Cape Lion; denuded soon after the settlers' arrival by fuel collectors and turned into a shifting sea of moving dunes; then overrun by invasive aliens: hakea and black wattle introduced by the colonial authorities in the 19th century to stabilise the sand. A wasteland, unsuitable for urban habitation, sodden with groundwater in the rainy months, lashed by sand in summer.

This is where Apartheid dumped its surplus people: first, coloured people evicted from the suburbs by Group Areas, then African migrants streaming in as the reserve economies collapsed. (Legend has it that the location of Khayelitsha, Cape Town's largest black township, was not based on any town planner's assessment but by P. W. Botha commandeering an SADF helicopter, flying over the trackless waste of dunes and Port

Jackson Willow, pointing with that stubby index finger at the scene below and saying '*Daar*'). At the curve of Baden Powell Road, just as it makes its turn toward the farmlands of Stellenbosch and Somerset West, you can stop your car and look back at the mountain over an ocean of wood and corrugated iron shacks clustered on the hot white sand. The line between the wealthy Cape and its poor people precisely maps the divide between that windblown sand and the red and yellow arable soil.

Not a pristine wilderness, then, but a wild system still, shaping and being shaped by the human settlements on and in it, impacted both by thoughtless use and care. Today there is a battle to preserve the last bits of unconcreted-over land: smallholder farmers push back against the property developers to protect the Philippi Horticultural Area; associations of environmentalists and black working-class people are coming together to sustain the waterways of Rondevlei and Zandvlei.

Always subject to change. One day soon quite a bit of it will be under water. With even a modest sea level rise, an estuarine lagoon will reach up to Rondebosch Common; Zeekoevlei and Fish Hoek will be lost to coastal flooding. Lord only knows what will happen with the nuclear power station at Koeberg.

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I am trying to do something tricky here, which is to convey or to suggest in words a form of knowledge that can't be captured in verbal propositions; which is perhaps not even properly 'knowledge' at all, but rather a changed sense of self, a changed sense of my place in the world.

This is not a new thought. That mountain landscapes are awe-inspiring and sublime, that wandering in them can uplift your soul; that the land will speak to you if you let yourself listen; this is well known. Others have been here before, telling how walking in the lowlands and uplands can be a way of finding yourself and your place in the world. Gary Snyder calls it a practice: 'practice in the field.' Walking in the wild, he says, is 'the first meditation', an embodied art of presence that allows you to be fully in the world, to experience yourself as one part of a greater whole, something incomparably older and vaster than you, mysterious and unknowable. Growing into that understanding, making it part of you, is for Snyder an essential aspect of learning how to be a human being on this planet.[5]

Snyder is a subtle teacher. The practice of the wild is not, for him, a concern with pristine and untouched nature. Neither is he at ease with any simplistic notion of sacred wilderness. 'For those who would see directly into essential nature', he says in his essay 'Blue Mountains Constantly Walking', 'the idea of the sacred is a delusion and an obstruction: it diverts us from seeing what is before our eyes: plain thusness'.[6] Not, I think, because there is no such thing as the sacred, but because *everything* is sacred.

And everything is wild. We are surrounded by ungoverned life and process: the 'fungi, moss, mold, yeast and such that surround and inhabit us;'[7] crickets in the paint locker of the oil tanker; the wild systems that reach even into the furthest corners of the urban world. Wildness is not a special aspect of 'nature', pristine and untouched by 'man'. It transcends and encompasses that dichotomy: it is the whole world and everything in it; a world that contains both the hearth and the steep mountain, both the spaces cultivated by humans and the waste lands where things go their own, more unpredictable way. While these lands need to be protected from ungoverned exploitation, the task at hand is not to fence them off like walled gardens. Rather, it is more challenging: it is to know that 'the world is places'; that wherever you are — 'slums, prairies, or wetlands',[8] you are held in a landscape with its affordances of stone, earth, weather, plant life, and local history; to find your place within it, and to care for it.

And thus opens up a deep tradition of landscape writing in the canon of the West – a canon that reaches back to the Romantic poets and their Sublime, to Thoreau and his pond, and to the Chinese landscape poets and Zen mystics before that. Populated also by people such as Annie Dillard, Kathleen Jamie, Barry Lopez, Rebecca Solnit and our own Eugene Marais. In one way or another these writers have explored a way of thinking and talking about land that understands it not in terms of its usefulness to us, not as a commodity or a factor of production, or as a site of 'ecosystem services', but as a site of *being*. Something

that goes its own way, beyond our desires and purposes; something that we can inhabit but never entirely bend to our purpose, and which therefore allows us to reframe and reimagine the place of our concerns. They seek relationship to the land that makes it possible to recover some sense of who we are *as human beings*, as one species among many, and to ask ourselves what that means for our responsibility to ourselves, to each other, and the land itself.

What strikes me when I read these people is the deep emotional charge. It is a school of writing at once elegiac and joyful. It mixes grief and concern about the impact of industrial civilisation on the networks of life around us with enduring delight in the beauty of what remains. Above all, much of this writing is, for all its seriousness and high purpose, innocent. Many of these writers write as if it is possible to reclaim, or to recover, even in the capitalocene, some version of the grace that is being lost in the destruction of the world's ungoverned processes. For Annie Dillard, witnessing the beauty she sees in the natural world is a way of connecting with the divine and inhuman light that shines through existence itself. For Kim Stanley Robinson being in the wild allows us to touch again ways of relating to the world that are more embodied, more nuanced, more sensitive and complex than that entrained by the ravenous hungers of capitalism. And for Snyder and, I guess, Le Guin, the ethics of the wild invite us to consider a return to simpler ways, to a turning away from the state, to an embrace of the virtues of face-to-face communities rooted in place and region.

It is not, these days, an ahistorical school of thought. Robert MacFarlane has made it his work to show how the landscape, and people's language for it, bears the traces of the past. In books like *The Old Ways*, *The Wild Places* and *Landmarks* he tries to recover some connection with thousands of years of uninterrupted but ever-changing existence in relation to the land.[9] The American wilderness writers of today are acutely aware of the brutal history of colonial settlement and of the genocide and dispossession of the first nations; they see themselves as reconnecting with, honouring and remembering those who have gone before, trying to recuperate a way of being less complicit with colonialism and conquest. Much of Robinson's Sierra book, for instance, is spent in the half-playful, half-serious game of renaming, distinguishing the 'good names' (the remaining Native American names, the ones that honour some arresting or beautiful aspect of the land), the bad ones (plain unimaginative or stupid) and the ugly (the peaks named after brutal conquerors, racist intellectuals, or slave owners), and proposing new substitutions: mountains to be named after noted conservationists; after heroes of political struggle (Mt Cesar Chavez) or after feminist writers (Mount Ursula K. Le Guin)!

It is a beautiful tradition, this playful, elegiac wilderness writing, and yet, and yet. That innocence does not quite work here. It's not only that almost everywhere here you can find the traces and hear the thrum of our industrial civilisation. It is also not that this managed wilderness is a contested space; that Park officials are at war with poor gatherers of herbs and traditional medicine from Hangberg or Vrygrond who, they say, come into the remnants of Afromontane forest to take plants and ringbark trees. It is that our history on this land is not deep and continuous, like it is for MacFarlane, or distant and settled, as it is for the Americans. It is ruptured and raw. The memories and knowledge of those who were here before us is eradicated. The trauma of colonial dispossession is all around us. The land is contested. It was stolen. My ancestors helped steal it.

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All the Du Toits in South Africa, white and black, are the descendants of one man. Two brothers came over to the Cape with the Huguenots: Guillaume and Francois. Guillaume had three daughters. His family name died with him. Francois had four sons. He's the *stamvader*, the patriarch.

Francois wanted to settle on what was later the farm Kleinbosch in Dal Josafat, on the far side of the Berg River. The story has it that the Governor of the Colony was reluctant to grant this wish. This was at the outermost boundary of white settlement: beyond the river there were San and Khoi kraals. Settling there, the Governor warned, would put him at risk of conflict or violence. Du Toit insisted, and the Governor at last relented, telling him that he would have to defend himself. The government could not guarantee his safety. This seemed to suit my ancestor just fine, and he became known for his hot pursuit of cattle raiders. This was

a time in which the San were not regarded as fully human by white settlers; and in a culture which had a word, '*boesmanjag*' (bushman hunting), for excursions in which San were killed like animals.

Genocide, in other words.

Today, the ravine up which he hunted them is known by his name: the Du Toitskloof. It is one of the most imposing mountain passes in the Western Cape.

In 2005 I spent a night alone next to the Kraalstroom, one of the tributaries of the Elandspad River, not far from where the murders must have been committed. It is one of the most serene and beautiful places I know: dense *waboom* (Protea nitida) crowd around a wooden cabin overlooking a clear, fresh stream. There is no electricity, no cell phone signal. The thousand voices of the river fill the air, a dense, layered stream of sound that encourages auditory hallucinations. You can hear music in it, turtle doves. Awake that night, alone in the dark, I listened to the river and heard San voices, clear as day. The women were chanting in insistent rhythms, the voices interwoven with complex, shifting hand claps. On and on it went.

It was not a happy sound. I knew I had a debt to pay.

So when I walk here, what am I? Not a pilgrim, to be sure. Not a caretaker or gardener of nature. A settler? A conqueror? That does not sit well with me. I am not defined by my past. Nor can I escape it.

I realise this is why Millie looms so large in my experience of these uplands. Because I can imagine her ancestors here, a thousand years or more ago, traversing this terrain with those they accompanied, those who came before, those who knew this land, who belonged to it, who named it and saw it, who saw the caracal and the sunbird and the sandstone cliff and the deep slots of the ravines, who gave them their names; and who are now gone, taking the names with them.

Millie does not speak, but in her quiet, intense, restless presence, she invokes them for me, I feel their absence: the ones who brought her and her kind here. So I follow her up the nameless ravines and across the plateau above; and when it is raining and the clouds swirl around us, and every thorny plant is bejewelled with water, we walk quietly through this land that once knew them too.

The mountain in the sea.

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One morning in early summer Millie and I were coming home after exploring the lower reaches of Diagonal ravine. By a tacit compact, she was not on a lead: leads, she had made clear, were undignified, humiliating. The air was cool. My spirits were enlarged by the crisp air, the huge bay below, the silent slopes. Around us, the city was coming to life.

On Susan Avenue we met a young black woman, trudging lackadaisically up to work. She was lost in thought, looking at the ground. Millie ran happily down to greet her but the woman did not respond. *Molo, sisi*,[10] I said as I passed her, my heart still buoyed up by the beauty of the day. Still, she did not respond, but she lifted up her eyes to me. And I saw in her eyes such depression, such darkness, such even and utter despair, that my spirit quailed.

ENDNOTES

1. Robinson, Kim Stanley. 2022. *The High Sierra: A Love Story*. New York: Little, Brown and Company.
2. My father says he was not a *BTKaner*, as the members of this organisation were known, and he says they did not join their camps. But he remembers walking with them. A feature of the BTK's walks, he recalls, were their mountain walking songs, mostly of German and presumably therefore Nazi origin. Not much listening to the landscape there, then.
3. 'Over everlasting mountains, where the echoing crags resound'. A line from the South African National anthem, the Call of South Africa.
4. Dillard, Annie. 1985. *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*. New York: Harper & Row.
5. Snyder, Gary. 1990. *The Practice of the Wild: With a New Preface by the Author*. First edition. San Francisco: North Point Press.
6. Snyder: Op. cit. p. 103
7. Snyder: Op. cit. p. 14
8. Snyder: Op. cit. p.25
9. Macfarlane, Robert. 2007. *The Wild Places*. London: Granta Books; 2013. *The Old Ways: A Journey on Foot*. Illustrated edition, London: Penguin Books; 2015. *Landmarks*. First Edition, London: Hamish Hamilton.
10. IsiXhosa: "Good morning, sister."